Teaching Midrash Meaningfully in Elementary School

1. Source for Midrashic Narrative

And it came to pass after these things (devarim) that the Lord tested Abraham ... (Genesis 22: 1).

There is an opinion of our rabbis that states, after the words of Satan who was castigating and saying, 'Out of all of the festive meals that Abraham made, he did not sacrifice to You, neither one ox nor one ram.' He [God] replied to him, 'Everything that he did, he did for the sake of his son. If I were to command him to sacrifice him to me, he would not object.' There are others who say, after the words of Ishmael who was boasting to Isaac in that he [Ishmael] was circumcised at thirteen years old. Isaac said to him, 'Are you trying to put me in awe on account of one membrane? If God were to say to me, "Sacrifice yourself to me," I would not object.'

(This midrashic text from the Babylonian Talmud tractate Sanhedrin, 89a, is found in Rashi's commentary, ad loc. s.v. after these devarim.)

2. A Teaching Model for Midrash Pedagogy

Step One: Explore the Biblical context of the midrash. Read the Biblical verses surrounding the one highlighted by the midrash.

Step Two: Read the midrash together with the class.

Step Three: With a backward glance to the Bible, guide the students to search for the exegetical occasion for the midrash. Problematise the underlying Biblical verse together with the class. Discuss with the class the following questions: What is the Biblical 'trigger' for this interpretation? Is there a lexical difficulty? Might there be a theological difficulty in the Biblical narrative? Does anything strike the students as unusual about the underlying Biblical text? Does there seem to be something missing from the Biblical story?

The exegetical occasion should be elicited from the children, and not dictated to them. This is the first step in problematising the midrash text. Similarly, it is the first step that the student needs to take in order to understand how the rabbis wrote their interpretations. The language used in class is along the lines of, 'What is difficult with the wording of this verse?' or 'Why might this Biblical story be troubling for us?'

Step Four: Looking for the interpretive message of the midrash. Read the midrash with the class, again, this time drawing the children's attention to what the rabbis may be teaching vis a vis the (recently problematised) Biblical verse. Ensure that the children understand the meaning of all of the words of the midrash.

1 The rationale for doing this research with young students was to show that if this can be done in the earlier grades, it can definitely be done in high school as well.
2 This model has been empirically tested in four co-ed fifth grade classes. These classes were in four different Jewish day schools: two in Israel, one in England, and one in the U.S.
Step Five: Discuss with the class what the rabbis are adding to the Bible story with their interpretation. Have they solved some kind of textual difficulty? Have they elaborated on the personalities of the Biblical heroes? Have they shed some light on the Bible story or, significantly, have they used the underlying verse as a foil to send a message to the reader? If the latter, what is the message? The language for this class discussion runs along the lines of, 'Are the rabbis actually explaining the verse, or are they teaching us some other lesson that they are connecting to this verse?' If the latter, why have they done so?

Step Six: (Specific to teaching theoretical midrash knowledge). Encourage the children to read the midrash a third time, in order to analyze the interpretive strategy/strategies employed by the rabbis. Discuss with the class why this strategy was employed. (This is done with the aid of academic scholarship on midrash.) Additionally, explore the midrash analytically, with the students, in order to enable them to determine whether there is more than one layer of interpretation being offered. Perhaps the rabbis have both a philological and a theological message.

Note: The teacher should always encourage the students to express any difficulty that they may be having during their encounter with the midrash text. This applies equally to following its interpretation as well as to the content of the interpretation. Also, the teacher should bear in mind that any step may have to be undertaken more than once, since this strategy involves the encouragement of critical thinking which is a complex task. Similarly, a previous step may have to be repeated after a subsequent step has been set in motion, if it becomes clear that the knowledge imparted in the previous step was not successfully absorbed by all students.

Moreover, it is important to underline that there is no fixed 'recipe' for presenting midrash to children. The steps outlined above should form a general, and not a rigid, guideline. Each midrash needs to be evaluated individually. Some may require additional steps—such as studying additional commentaries—to help uncover where the midrash is trying to lead the reader.

For a copy of the conference paper Teaching Midrash Meaningfully in Elementary School please e-mail Deena Sigel: deenaedd@yahoo.co.uk
Additionally I welcome your comments through e-mail correspondence.